

### Mark Thomas Gibson: *WHIRLYGIG!*

By William Corwin

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Mark Thomas Gibson's work has always expressed a hope that the citizenry of the nation will embrace a reasonable and diplomatic means of negotiation towards a harmonious co-existence, but in *WHIRLYGIG!* he acknowledges that political realities may lie elsewhere. The paintings *Rally Jams* and *Whirly Gig* (both 2022) are conflicts at a scruffy violent standstill, representing the blunt and predictable state of affairs that "for every action in nature there is an equal and opposite reaction;" that nothing comes easy, and more importantly, nothing comes without a fight. Change in fact only comes in the scrum and whoever pushes hardest holds the field. *Whirly Gig* is a mess of tangled arms and legs, and a standstill of tense balanced forces, and these forces—of violence, tension, and morbid balance—are the centerpiece of the exhibition. Hands are clasped in desperate struggle, feet are firmly planted, knees and elbows are filled with potential energy to fight back or hold against a force of equal or greater magnitude. These knots of equilibria are reminiscent of diagrams in a Physics 101 problem set. The tangle in *Rally Jams* is interspersed with snakes of text that read "You can't always get what you want" among other things. While we know what side on which the artist stands, this tangle is clearly self-defeating: no side will be victorious—no heads or faces are visible and a draw, or gutting pyrrhic victory, seem to be the only conclusion.



Still, Gibson wants us to enjoy our history-in-the-making lesson, as dire as it has become. He pulls inspiration from antique political cartoons; Thomas Rowlandson, Honoré Daumier, and William Hogarth, and from the inky comics of Will Eisner and George Herriman. In *All A Go (Steampipes and Hands)* (2022), pressure is again exerted, released in a cacophony of anthropomorphized steam whistles. It is impossible to gauge the emotion—whether this is relief or anger, or joy or pain, but we see the mouths of the pipes and their instantly recognizable cloudburst tropes of comic sound, and we are reassured that we are being entertained and not lectured: Gibson is careful to pull from the visual lexicon of speed lines, thought balloons, and dust clouds that trigger both understanding and amusement. The same is true of the studies of hands and

feet *Situated* (2022) and *Your Hopes and Prayers* (2022); the former a pencil drawing of a leather shoe and the latter a pair of hands. The heel and the imaginary lines of energy abutting the sole of the shoe are far more convincing than an angry discourse on fiscal policy (unfortunately). These drawings also hearken back to the care and craft of renaissance sketches, the effort to get an emotion or glance just right with a pen stroke. To a degree Gibson rejects texture in his paintings, choosing to make them about brushstroke. He paints in ink, and it sits very precisely on the smooth sanded surface of the canvas. The color pops and the blank white of the canvas sparkles with the gypsum in the primer—the artist achieves that crisp, new comic book feel by amplifying the nature of the paper.

Several works on paper engage with a particular typology of political art, the slight-of-hand. In *Boutonniere 1* (2021), a collage on paper, a gloved hand waves and a passel of impossibly blue Irises appear and fill the frame. The illusory nature of these tricks is heightened by Gibson's frequent use of bricks in the background—almost as if we are in a theater and the banal wall of backstage peeps through. In *Mark and the Shark* (2022), Gibson practices a bit of art historical slight-of-hand by inserting himself into John Singleton Copley's *Watson and the Shark* (1778-82); recasting all the figures in the image of himself. Overall Gibson creates a statement of Black precarity in America, while dialoguing with the other most important shark-centric political painting in the American canon, Homer's *The Gulf Stream* (1899). Created more than one hundred years after Copley's, *The Gulf Stream* comments on the untenable position of African Americans post-Reconstruction. Gibson feels nimble and at ease reconfiguring existing formulas and updating them to meet current needs. This is perhaps his way forward, through the morass of our current moment, which sadly seems to be a necessary preoccupation.

